IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

Help for H-P LaserJet not always that helpful

As you might expect with a popular product like the Hewlett-Packard LaserJet printer, it has spawned a market for add-on products that make it even more productive.

But improving on an already excellent product is not easy. It hasn't become the best-selling laser printer for the IBM PC and PC-compatible personal computers because it has a lot of faults. It already prints about eight pages a minute, with superb quality, in complete silence.

Introduced a few years ago, the LaserJet has been selling like hot cakes ever since.

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By now, most popular software for the IBM PC includes the ability to drive the printer, which makes it a safe buy.

But, like just about all personal computer products, it's not perfect, and several companies have jumped into the market by offering add-on products that correct various shortcomings. Some are helpful, but most aren't. Some are inexpensive, but — you guessed it — most aren't.

Here are my opinions of five add-on products, all of which attempt to increase the paper-handling capabilities of the LaserJet:

✔ BDT Six-Bin MultiFeeder. This $4,495 product expands the LaserJet's meager sheet-feeding capabilities by adding six additional bins. It's available from BDT Products Inc. of Irvine, Calif. The LaserJet's internal paper tray holds only about 100 sheets, which is used up in about nine minutes of continuous operation. This requires continually refilling the paper tray.

The six-bin feeder can be stocked with a greater quantity of forms, but can hold different forms in each bin. A code inserted in your word processing program at the top of each page tells the sheet feeder which tray to use. In theory, it sounds great.

In practice, however, I was unable to get it to work consistently during two months of constant trying. For some reason, something was always going wrong — the codes didn't always work, the paper did not always feed, it jammed, or it was simply stubborn. Worse, it always required an "expert" to be present while it ran, which cost far more than the additional secretarial cost of manual paper shuffling. In the end, I gave up on it.

✔ BDT three-bin LaserFeeder. This smaller version of the above machine lists for $1,895. I didn't give it a try, and probably won't, considering that one of the company's service technicians said the larger machine was easier to use and broke down less often than the smaller machine. I'm no masochist!

✔ Sterling PaperMax 500. One way around the paper-quantity problem is to have Sterling Computer Products of Escondido, Calif., install a new, larger paper tray in the LaserJet body. The 500-sheet capacity tray costs $495, along with complete installation and a one-year warranty. Unfortunately, the firm is the only one that can do the installation, so your LaserJet printer must be shipped to them. Shipping costs are about $140 plus time and risk.

✔ BDT Flipper. A wonderful little gadget that attaches to the output side of the LaserJet and turns over each page as it comes out. One of the nonsensical features of the LaserJet is that it stacks pages in reverse order as they come out, requiring you to manually reorder everything. This device simply turns over each page, eliminating the manual step. The only drawback is price: $149.

✔ AVN Collaser. Lest you think that I don't like anything, here's one product that I can heartily recommend. Unlike the mechanical BDT Flipper, the AVN Collaser performs the same function without any moving parts. It's a funny-shaped, plexiglass drop-tray that catches the papers turns them over as they fall. It fits other laser printers as well. The cost is $34.50, including shipping, and can be ordered from AVN Inc., Provo, Utah, (801) 375-8533.

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